Introduction

‘Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.’
Ralph Waldo Emerson, American writer and public speaker (1803–82)

What is homework?

Homework is a vital part of learning, and it is expected by students, parents, school directors, and teachers. The benefits of homework are obvious: students retain class-taught language, they reinforce what they have learnt, they develop study habits which ultimately allow them to develop as independent learners, and their cognitive understanding of language increases.

Homework is an extension of the classroom which allows students to internalize information that has been presented in class. It bridges the gap between lessons, so that students can continue to work on English throughout the week even if they have only two classes a week. Homework is, therefore, a cornerstone of students’ learning process. Most educators understand this and set homework conscientiously.

Both students and teachers can use homework to monitor progress. Parents can also do this. In their book Seven Steps to Homework Success (see Bibliography), Sydney S. Zentall and S. Goldstein explain the value of homework to parents: ‘Homework is important because it is at the intersection between home and school. It serves as a window through which you can observe your children’s education.’

The role of homework

Students themselves often fail to appreciate the fundamental role that homework can play in their education. Sarah North and Hannah Pillay, in their ELT Journal article ‘Homework: re-examining the routine’, report findings from a homework survey of Malaysian English teachers. They asked the teachers about the efficacy of homework, both in terms of how they as teachers dealt with homework and about the performance of their students. The results showed an interesting discrepancy, with many teachers reporting
satisfaction with their own performance, but not with their students’ performance. The overall impression was that a significant number of teachers feel they are doing the right things, but are not achieving the results that they would like.’ North and Pillay quote the following comments from teachers: ‘Students don’t want to do their homework. They would rather copy, or get scolded by me.’ ‘At least half of them try to complete the work started in class, while the rest copy each other’s work. Most of the students have the tendency to copy answers since they have too many other subjects.’

Many teachers can identify with these comments. I have always tried to set useful homework, and spend time designing valuable activities for the students. However, the results have often been that few students do the homework, many copy from the diligent students, and others make a joke of not handing in any work. We have all heard the age-old excuses for not giving in homework, such as ‘the dog ate it’, or ‘I left it on the bus’. If this is a common experience in classrooms, homework needs to be re-evaluated as a classroom protocol.

Re-evaluating homework

A few years ago, at the end of a lesson, I opened my coursebook in order to set some homework exercises for the students. They looked at me dolefully, almost as though they were surrendering in a battle, and resignedly wrote down what I asked them to do. As I looked at my students I knew what the results would be. I wasn’t wrong. When I collected the work from them in the following lesson, only half of the class had done it. Of the work handed in, every single answer was identical (probably originating from the strongest student in class). I knew that it would be difficult to motivate myself to correct their work.

I continued to set homework tasks, but I began to wonder why the students weren’t more motivated. I decided to work on the issue by first identifying my own aims. I decided that I wanted to achieve the following:

1. Students should feel homework tasks are useful.
2. Tasks should be interesting and varied.
3. Work should include not only written tasks, but tasks focusing on all skills.
4. Individual students’ needs should be met, which means varying homework tasks for different students.
5. Students’ attitude to homework should be improved, for example, by allowing them to contribute ideas by designing their own tasks.
6. Language should be liberated from the classroom.

Before you continue reading this book, please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. You may like to consider them as part of a group activity with your colleagues.
Why do you, as a teacher, set homework?
How do you feel when marking homework?
Is the homework always in written form, such as gap-fills, compositions, etc.?
How much importance do you place on homework?
Have you ever asked your students what importance they place on homework?
Can you remember specific tasks that you have set for homework?

Now think about one class that you teach at the moment.
Do the students do their homework?
If they don’t, why is that?
How motivated are they?
How long does it take to do the homework you set?

While answering these questions, I began to think about how I would approach homework as a learner and what I would like to do while learning. Doing things we enjoy is a vital part of homework. I was learning French and decided to set myself homework. I started by listing my own leisure activities:

- going to the movies
- watching television
- reading (usually fiction)
- talking on the phone.

I now had a set of activities that I could adapt as homework tasks.

Next, I considered which topics interested me:

- famous people
- current events
- different cultures
- food
- health.

I designed this activity for myself based on the above findings:

1. Watch the French movie *Amélie* on video.
2. Pick out words that you know in French; pause the tape, repeat the language, and try to improve your pronunciation.
3. Write the story of *Amélie* in French.

The task was motivating because it was based on an activity that I wanted to do, i.e. watch the film.

In the next lesson with my students, I told them to go to the movies, watch a film, and write a summary of it for me. They also had to give the film a star rating (five stars being a must-see, no stars being a must-not-see). Of my 15 students, 12 did the homework—not bad. Students will do things which they enjoy. I also enjoyed reading their summaries.

Now think of a group of students you teach and answer these questions:
What interests do they have?

What would be the most interesting homework task that you could set them?

Set this task at the end of the next lesson, and see what the results are. Now reflect on how you can continue to motivate students outside class.

A new approach

In an interview with Glori Chaika for the Education World website (see Bibliography), Howard Gardner, the creator of the theory of multiple intelligences, said that: ‘Teachers should devote energy to creating homework that is stimulating and provocative rather than banal. And parents or mentors should go shoulder-to-shoulder with youngsters, helping to motivate them, thinking of ways in which to help them without giving the answer, and being aware of the child’s special gifts and weaknesses.’

In the booklet Helping Your Students with Homework, Sharon Bobbitt wrote: ‘Homework is meant to be a positive experience which encourages children to learn. Assignments should not be used as a punishment.’

Both are talking mainly about children, but the same is true of adult students. If homework is seen as a punishment or as banal, it will not be effective. I experimented with homework tasks and found that they needed to meet the criteria below in order for students to do and benefit from the work.

1 Make it fun

Think about what your students are interested in—what do they do outside class? Do they read, watch movies, go out with friends? Then think about how these activities can be turned into homework tasks.

2 Make it relevant

For students to commit their time to homework they need to see its value. In class, we as teachers often signpost our work: *Now we are going to look at these words, because they will help you when you need to write a letter.* Students are aware of why we are asking them to do certain things. The same should be true of homework—we need to communicate the aims behind it. Consider asking students to watch a movie: *I’d like you to do this because it’s fun, and because the lexis is up-to-date and useful.* It’s simple, but it may mean that your students will understand the progression they will make in their studies by doing the work.
If we can convince students to do the work we set, all of the benefits that were mentioned at the beginning of this introduction will occur. Students will increase the pace of their learning and when their progress becomes obvious, they will be more motivated in class. In my experience, when this happens setting homework becomes increasingly easy because students are always more likely to do the work when they know they are benefiting from it.

3 Match students’ learning preferences

Ultimately, homework creates an autonomous learner: someone who takes an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and taking advantage of learning opportunities. For learners to become autonomous they must recognize their own preferred ways of learning. As teachers we make available options for learning, and students have to make conscious decisions about what works for them.

Some learners are very self-aware and confident enough to follow their own path. Other students may need more guidance and support as they may hold onto previous learning experiences or misunderstand their own ways of learning. As teachers we can encourage students to continue to do activities which are successful for them, as well as to try new ways.

The following questionnaire will help to establish learner styles. Its aim is not necessarily to label the students (you are a visual/kinaesthetic learner) but to make students aware which types of activities they prefer, and encourage them to do what works for them—when and where it works best. If students can find out their preferences, they should be better able to facilitate their own learning outside class.

Ask the students to consider tips for themselves. You can then go over their answers in class and add more ideas and advice. Consider suggesting some of these points.

1 If students like to work with partners, encourage them to meet outside class. Recommend a place and time that they can meet. There may be people in class who already enjoy working together—exploit this by asking them to do certain tasks together and to write homework as a joint effort. This may not be as arduous as doing tasks alone.

2 If students enjoy music, ask them to decide on music which best fits with English studies. Students can come up with a list which they can display in class. You may want to recommend music too.

3 When students say they enjoy reading, find out what it is specifically that they enjoy. It may be science fiction, for example, or romance novels. Ask the students to bring in books they have read in their own language and ask them to describe the plots to you in English. They can prepare projects on their favourite authors and present information in class.

4 If students like to read aloud, ask them to record themselves. They can try reading a variety of different text types. Listen to the tapes and give them feedback on their speaking skills. Students could
also work on speaking activities from this book, which will
capitalize on their enjoyment of speaking in English.

5 When students draw or doodle, it may mean that they like learning
in a visual way. Involve these students in activities which use
pictures or other visual tools.

Encourage students to make their own homework plan, giving the
times and days when they will work. This is especially useful for
exam students, and for business students who may be on a tight
schedule.

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Questionnaire

Where and when:

1. Do you learn better in the evening, morning, afternoon, or at night?
   (If you don’t know, experiment.)
2. When do you have time for yourself so that you can study without distraction?
3. Where do you prefer to study: at home, at work, in the school library,
   over a coffee, outside?
4. Do you like to be in complete silence or with background noise,
   such as music?

How:

5. Do you like to complete exercises from a workbook or coursebook?
6. Do you like to create your own sentences and ideas?
7. Do you like to listen to English more than you like to read it?
8. Do you like to work with a friend?
9. Do you like to speak rather than listen?
10. Do you like to read aloud?

Give yourself a tip, perhaps by completing one of the following, if it applies to you:

I like to work with someone, therefore I should ________________________

I like to listen to music, so maybe I should ________________________

I like to read aloud, so I should ________________________

I like to be alone, therefore I should ________________________

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Time

Students have to make a time commitment if they are to do homework. Of course, they have many external distractions: television, the movies, going out with friends, reading in their first language, and so on. Students who are also working or in school have many other time-consuming tasks. Therefore the activities we set need to be not only motivating, worthwhile, and enjoyable, but also manageable in terms of time. All too often, too much homework is set after a class, which can mean that even a motivating task becomes a lengthy chore.

In conclusion

This book addresses some of the problems that we, as teachers, face with homework and aims to provide useful, fun activities that can make homework tasks motivating. Experiment with what works for your students, rather than relying on more traditional ideas. If homework is to fulfil its place in the learning cycle, we first and foremost have to make sure our students do it, by making it reflect their interests and preferences, and fit with their time constraints.